

News Advisory

From the Rhode Island Judiciary



New state Access to Justice Office to coordinate 3 essential court services

November 15, 2021: Three vital court services related to access to justice have been brought under one umbrella with the creation of a new office within the Supreme Court.

The Access to Justice Office, newly located in the Noel Judicial Complex in Warwick, will oversee the Judiciary's compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), the Office of Court Interpreters, and services for self-represented litigants. The latter has been of particular interest to Supreme Court Chief Justice Paul A. Suttell as more people choose to represent themselves in domestic, evictions, and small claims cases.

"Among the Judiciary's challenges that have been starkly evident to me as Chief Justice is the rising number of self-represented litigants in our courts and the need for equal access to justice for our citizens with little or no financial resources in civil matters," Chief Justice Suttell said. "While we often think of equal access as being for those litigants who cannot afford to pay for legal representation, it also includes prompt and effective language services for those who do not speak or understand English, as well as accommodations for people with disabilities. This new office will help to coordinate these and other attributes of true access to justice."

The grouping of these three services is the first significant administrative initiative of the new state court administrator, Julie P. Hamil. The Access to Justice Office is being coordinated by staff attorney Tamera N. Rocha, who most recently had been in the Supreme Court Office of General Counsel. "During her time in the Office of General Counsel, Ms. Rocha worked regularly in all three of these key areas serving the public by facilitating their access to the courts," Hamil said. "Tamera brings a keen practicality, combined with the requisite legal training and a kind, patient approach that will serve her well in this new role."

ADA compliance includes accessibility to individuals with physical challenges such as impaired hearing, blindness, and mobility difficulty. The Judiciary receives about 150 requests a year for sign language services or assistive listening equipment.

In 2020, the Office of Court Interpreters provided language services in more than 5,850 court events, which because of the pandemic was a little more than half of the services provided in 2019. The most requested language is Spanish, followed by Cape Verdean, Portuguese, Mandarin, and Arabic. Vanessa Dean, coordinator of the Office of Court Interpreters, will work in the new Access to Justice office under Rocha's supervision and will continue the office's work assigning interpreters and coordinating interpreter services, fulfilling the Judiciary's language access plan, and the testing and qualifying of interpreters.

Defendants who cannot afford a lawyer in criminal cases are entitled to representation by a public defender or court-appointed attorney, but no such entitlement exists in civil cases. In 2019, there were 36,885 cases in the state court system in which at least one party to the case was self-represented at any given time during the life of the case. The overwhelming majority – 33,815 cases – occurred in the District Court, which hears small claims, housing, employment, and other types of civil cases. The Family Court, which hears divorces, custody and child support matters, had nearly 2,300 such cases in 2019. The Access to Justice office will be a dedicated resource to enhance the Judiciary's services to self-represented litigants. Focus areas will include the simplification of court forms, improving in-courthouse interactions, and the provisions of self-help resources.

With the new office, Chief Justice Suttell hopes to develop strategies to increase public awareness of access to justice issues, increase pro bono and other legal aid to self-represented litigants, and increase collaboration among legal aid providers.

Chief Justice Suttell pointed to the words of the late U.S. Supreme Court Justice Lewis F. Powell Jr., who noted that "Equal Justice under Law is not merely a caption on the façade of the Supreme Court building. It is perhaps the most inspiring ideal of our society... it is fundamental that justice should be the same, in substance and availability, without regard to economic status."

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